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LEAVING FOR GOOD

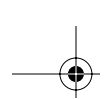
Looking for Jesus Outside the Exits

The question is, what does the Holy Spirit want you to do?” The preacher’s words woke me from my usual sermon daze. I can’t remember what that particular sermon was even about, only that this was the final question punctuating some point about some spiritual idea too abstract for me to remember. What was gripping about this particular question on this particular Sunday morning was the answer that was ringing in my ears. For me the question was not rhetorical, and I could not seem to shake the overwhelming response repeating in my brain: “Leave!”

Could the Holy Spirit really want me to leave? I did the usual theological gymnastics: it must just be my own sin; it must be my cynicism; going to church every week is the bare minimum for a committed Christian; “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing” (Hebrews 10:25). How could God be calling me to disobey his own Word? What is wrong with me?

I can’t count how many services I’ve sat through utterly bored. I realize that my Attention Deficit Disorder is a factor, but I still can’t fathom what it is about traditional church services that people like. All of it seems so tedious to me—on the best days tolerable, on the worst painful. And I love God. My heart burns for his kingdom. There are nights when I can’t sleep because my kingdom dreams won’t let me.





It's as if the intensity of my burning for God and frustration with church grow in proportion to each other, as if they are somehow the same thing. Or at least they are related to the same longing. My heart burns like those of the travelers on the road to Emmaus, who walked with Jesus. My life is like that. I know what it's like to sit with my community looking back at yesterday, last week and last year, as we shake our heads and ask each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us?" (Luke 24:32). Except, it seems, when I go to church.

Church used to be exciting to go to. It's not like they did anything different back then, but I guess it was new and we were younger and hadn't heard these sermons. But as the years have gone by it seems a bit like Groundhog Day. The same kind of teaching every week, the same worship style, the same prayers.

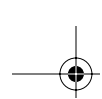
DAVE

Do I alone live with this apparent contradiction? I don't think so. The pastor's question was a good one. What *does* the Holy Spirit want you to do? The Hebrew and Greek languages (languages used in the Bible) both translate *Spirit* to mean "breath" or "wind." Both words imply life, the life that comes from the breath of God. God's Spirit, his breath on and in us, is creative, free and unpredictable. We are, as the church of Jesus, being called to life in the Spirit. In part, this is why I will never understand the fascination with a predictable, unremarkable church where one week is always the same as the next. Spiritual boredom is an oxy-

moron; it should be an impossible contradiction. What is from the Spirit is never boring, because it represents the breath of God in our lives.

Here are some of the thoughts I struggled with before I became a leaver:





I feel like a hypocrite. I have no connection to this place or these people anymore. I've become the thing that I most despise: a pew warmer, what Jesus called "white-washed tombs" (Matthew 23:27). I'm performing religious duties out of obligation and no heart. I'm not sure I even agree with what is being said anymore. But I don't have anyone to talk to about it. We all just come and listen but we don't ever do anything, we don't know each other, we don't communicate.

Didn't James say that faith without works is dead? Is not true religion caring for the orphan and widow? We don't seem to do that. We don't even talk about doing that. We don't even think about talking about doing that. What purpose do I serve here? Could it really be that I'm only wanted here because of my tithe potential?

But you know what they say: no church is perfect. I'm not perfect. I ought to just stay. I will probably come back next week. But I don't want to. Besides, if I leave, where will I go? Is that really you, Lord?

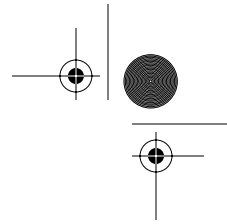
The question that awakened this internal conversation in me that day is a variation on the question that this book will address: Is it really possible that God might be actually leading Christians to leave church? Certainly people leave churches every day for myriad reasons.

Escape Routes

For as long as there have been churches, people have left them. When I talk about leaving, I don't mean looking for another church. I'm not talking about leaving the experience of church as we know it. Leavers aren't leaving *one* particular church. They are leaving church itself.

It's part of the corporate experience to see some join and others leave, whether through death, disaffection or waning





faith. There may have been a time when one had to resist considerable sociocultural pressure to leave the church. Not so now. Yet still today, many people want to leave but don't. Some are loyalists, committed to the church's leader or even the building itself. Others are theologically constrained; their understanding of the Bible forbids them to leave.

Many people leave in another way. They are physically present, perhaps every week. Yet they construct a hollow, heartless kind of church that merely tolerates what was meant to be

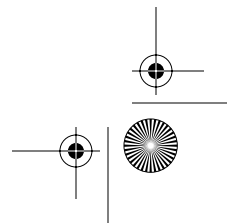
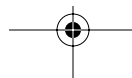
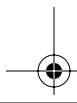
Sometimes I feel like I would get as much out of staying at home as going, or better yet fishing or reading a good book. I might experience truth at the very least—more than the morning at church. It just feels like one more thing on my week of things to do and there is a lack of joy associated with it, an obligation moreso.

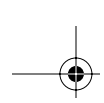
CRYSTAL

the zenith of worship, community and mission in the life of believers. Instead of a living, vibrant community, a body if you will, church and its gatherings become a congregation of jaded, bitter people, bearing all kinds of unholy fruit and ultimately damaging the name of Jesus in the neighborhoods where they gather. Still, for some, the social and internal pressure to stay outweighs these.

For others, especially in American culture, there is another motivation for leaving. In a world defined by consumption, churches have also become consumable. The process of deciding on or continuing with a church is more

like deciding what toothpaste to buy than deciding whom to marry (though even that metaphor tends to fall flat, given the perishable nature of marriage in this same cultural current). We tend to stay loyal as long as the advertised promises are kept and we see the personal results that we pay for. Church has be-





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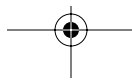
come more and more a matter of cash transfer for services. This means that church is now relegated to the margins of choice; it's an option in a sea of options that vie for our time and money (albeit limited) and it proposes to offer something of value in return.

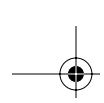
So people aren't particularly brand loyal when it comes to church. I know Christians who are more committed to always buying a Honda than they are to a particular gathering of believers. While this is a real problem, church shopping to find a more palatable or fashionable church isn't what I want to address.

Unfortunately, there is a more profoundly disturbing defection happening in Western churches: for more and more people, church itself is a failed experiment. Many have tried enough churches to come to the conclusion that they should not go at all. What they once hoped would nurture a growing relationship with God and foster deep bonds of friendship and community with the people of God has actually served to suffocate both enterprises, causing sincere Christians to consider leaving as the only healthy course. Let us be clear, we are talking about people who, while far from perfect, are deeply committed to Jesus Christ and his mission. They are, in many cases, also so committed to the church (invisible) that they feel like imposters in the local church expressions they have attended and feel that they are leaving on principle.

Leaving Church in Pursuit of God

When church leaders and others reduce the reasons for leaving to spiritual apathy or loss of faith, the church loses its opportunity to see its impotence and the bold and prophetic nature of the leaving done by those who are still committed to Jesus Christ and his mission. I'm talking about people who are leaving the church but not God. It's very important to establish from the outset that when I refer to leavers, I'm not talking about people who leave churches because they are immature





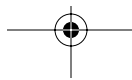
or angry at the pastor or didn't get the position on the leadership team that they wanted. I'm not talking about people who are leaving one church in search of a better one. For some people, this is all they need. They are frustrated with their church, so they need to find a healthier one. But what happens when all the churches near us have the same problem? What if every church we attend leaves us struggling and not encouraged?

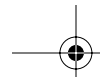
When I talk about leavers, I'm talking about a group that's difficult to dismiss. They are leaving (though never leaving perfectly) in their pursuit of God. These are people who want to do what is right and to live in a way that honors Jesus bringing the kingdom into the world around them. These are people who want to worship God with their whole lives, want to live in community with other believers and want to be a part of God's mission in the world. These are people who are trying to follow Jesus, and part of what they are saying is that for them to stay and to remain faithful to Jesus are mutually exclusive.

This is the disturbing paradox with which we must wrestle in this book. In the final analysis, for leavers, it isn't a problem with God but a problem with the organization of God. Still, many leavers aren't sure what to do. Some stay (even though internally they have left), others leave bitterly and wounded, and many end up isolated, having escaped one kind of incongruence only to adopt another.

This book isn't meant as a critique of the church. It is a book for leavers. However, for many leavers the sense of isolation and failed reform is what drives us away from each other and from re-forming the church. I would love to arrest that process. We are critiquing the church with our longing for something more. I don't want to be critical but to dream of more. Leavers want to dream in a way that builds something and not criticize in a way that only tears something down.

Leavers first need to know that they aren't alone. One estimate places the figure at 55,000 people a week leaving Western





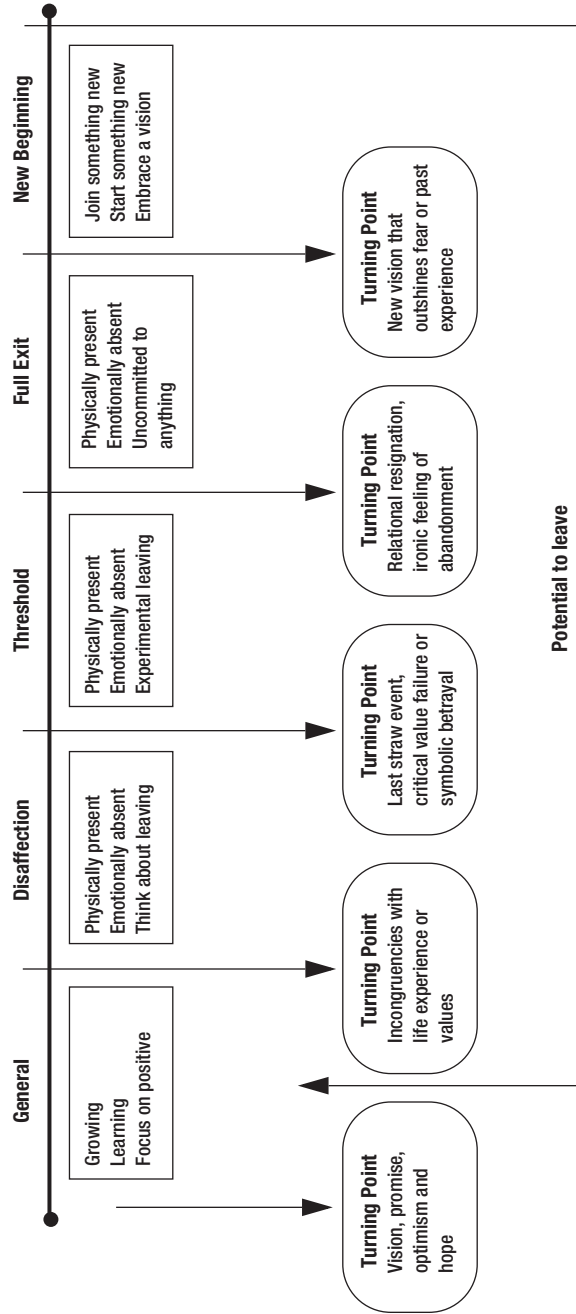
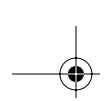
churches. They also need to know that their concerns are real and in many cases even prophetic. Finally, they need to know what to do with their confusion, with their concerns and ultimately with their talent-soaked lives. Who are we? What are our concerns? How can we stay fully faithful to the God who himself exists in community and calls us his church?

Leaving in Stages

Leaving happens in stages. I believe that there are thousands of Christians who will be able to identify themselves beyond the first stages of this continuum, giving each of us a context in which to place our own experience (see page 20). Leaving is a process of coming to terms with disaffection. Every leaver seems to come to what Alan Jamieson calls a “turning point” event, or what could be considered the last straw. In his book *A Churchless Faith*, Jamieson describes the process of leaving through a series of interviews with Christians who have been significantly involved in and then left their churches. He discovered that for most of them there is a moment when they simply could not take it anymore. One leaver called it “my moment of truth.”

For me it was a Sunday morning, sitting bored and listening to the pastor talk about how much money they had spent on remodeling the bathrooms because the style in which they were decorated needed to be updated. I knew at that moment that would be my last Sunday. Yet the feelings of frustration and disaffection had been going on for months, if not years. Usually these single events are the catalyst sending us into a new phase, yet they are merely a culmination of a series of similar and related events or realizations. While the diagram designates these stages in equal increments, the duration of each will be different for each person and each stage in some cases can last twenty years or twenty days. Further, some people may never leave a stage.





Leaving Happens in Stages





Obviously, if someone were to live his whole life in the contentment stage, that would be ideal. More tragic would be the leaver who finally lives alone in the exit stage. There is no guarantee that a person will progress from one to the next. Yet many people will not only go through all of these stages at one point but, sadly, also will repeat the cycle many times.

Contentment. This stage is marked by hope and guarded optimism about the people and possibilities that a new church offers. Many Christians experience a new church in the light of their “old” church, finding the differences exhilarating. Those people who have been to multiple churches before entering into this phase will tend to stay for less time. Those whose initial conversion to Christ occurred in connection to a particular church will likely stay there longer because they have no other point of reference for comparison, their faith in Jesus is strongly tied to the life and practice of that church, and they are naturally less cynical about the church.

You may know people who seem to be in this stage for many years, if not their whole life. Learning and growing characterize it. People in this stage tend to focus their attention on the positive and are willing to overlook what they see as imperfections in the church, because of the experience they are having and the positive impact they see that the church has had.

I hesitate to call this phase the honeymoon, because it can last a very long time, and in the best of churches it does. I also want to be careful not to imply that anyone in particular will leave this stage or that every church eventually needs to be left. But this stage is like a honeymoon in that the relationship is still untested and is mostly characterized by optimism and an appreciation of the strengths (real or imagined) of the church. This can be contrasted to later stages when the overwhelming negatives that the person is wrestling with obscure those same positive attributes.

Disaffection. Churchgoers don’t become disaffected over-





night. As I will address later, leavers tend to marshal a number of common critiques at this stage. Sometimes triggered by a crisis or simply by the natural maturation and development of the Christian, this stage is characterized by a sense of inconsistency between the reality of the leaver's season of life and the church's emphases, programs and values. Those same emphases that were once so helpful become less so, and in some cases seem hollow or clichéd.

For example, when someone first makes a commitment to Jesus, the admonition to pray and believe can be a new and

powerful concept. Exploring the possibility that we can pray and ask God for anything in his name and he will grant it is an amazing experience. The new believer then goes on an adventure in prayer, testing her new faith and often seeing that Jesus is real and alive and responding to her heartfelt prayers. Certainly she experiences some failures and doubts, but since she's so young in her faith she chalks them up to lack of faith.

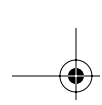
That pray-and-believe message heard through the experience of a relatively new believer is very different when heard through the experience of a second-stage Christian. Perhaps

Growing up in church was more of a social thing, at least when I was very young, so I was never really disappointed in what I found inside those walls. It felt like school, there wasn't really anywhere for me to fit in, I just kind of floated. I guess as I began to mature, I began to feel like something was missing.

KIM

this believer just lost his thirty-five-year-old wife to cancer. And while they prayed fervently, confessed sin, believed with all they had for a healing, the battle was lost. And now this widower sits under the same teaching, wondering about ques-



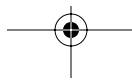


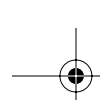
tions that don't ever seem to find their way into the curriculum. He has to swallow harder the same message of faith and prayer uncomplicated by the reality of too much life lived.

Other times the trigger to this stage is an alteration in the apparent values of a church. It becomes clear to the leaver that what has been taught and established is just words that carry with them little or no action. Or the church begins to move away from values that felt to the leaver like promises.

One church I attended for years talked about serving the poor, something to which I was very committed. I felt immediately at home in this church because they often talked about the need to help people who are "less fortunate." They also had a program that served a hot meal to the homeless on Sunday afternoons. Many of these homeless people, if not all, attended the Sunday-morning worship service (a fact which greatly encouraged me at first). However, over time I learned that the lunch was served only to those who came to the service beforehand and that those who were late would not be served. Those that did attend worship sat in the back two rows of the church, and almost none of the congregation interacted with them. These disheveled seekers were looking for food but needed more. However, no one ever sat in the rows where they sat, and during the greeting time, no one would go back to greet them. The congregation did not practice the value that was espoused from the front nor was it given much emphasis in the practice of the leaders. This realization took time but contributed to my growing sense of disaffection.

People in this stage are leavers in their own right. Many churchgoers share the concerns of the leavers and are themselves contemplating leaving but simply have not done so yet. And they may not. While we may not ever be able to identify them as leavers, I would like to include them in the discussion because their concerns are the same, and in many ways (though not physically) they have left.

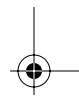
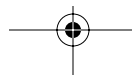


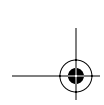


Threshold. This stage is usually characterized by the final disillusionment over a critical value or a betrayal (symbolic or otherwise) that simply cannot be overlooked. In the disaffection stage, the leaver is physically present but emotionally absent, but in the threshold stage, the leaver is physically absent but emotionally still connected, perhaps even more. The leaver has finally decided to stop attending church events. What makes this stage different from the next (closing the door) is that the leaver is still connected emotionally to the church.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, the leaver is hoping that his absence will elicit a response from the church and perhaps even catalyze change. People have difficulty believing that they don't matter at all. Often years of tithing, participation and emotional loyalty creates a bond between the church (its people, its leaders and even the building itself) and the leaver, so that he expects his absence not only to be noticed but also looked into. In short, he hopes that someone will come after him. One older study conducted by Dr. John Savage recorded the "dropout patterns" of four midsize churches and found that most of the people who had left waited six to eight weeks to see if anyone would come and find out why they'd left. He also recorded that in 100 percent of the cases, no one ever did.

In my case, I genuinely believed I would be missed. I waited for a phone call from the pastor, whom I considered a personal friend and colleague in ministry, but waited in vain. You might be wondering why I didn't simply go and make my grievances known to the leaders of the church? It does seem childish to leave angry and pout, waiting for someone to come and check on you. Leavers often do speak to the leaders about their concerns. Sometimes these concerns are heard and no action is taken. Sometimes there is a disagreement over the concerns. But in other cases, leavers don't want to cause a problem. Pastors, in particular, are overcriticized and blamed for every-





thing, and I knew my pastor was under terrible strain leading his large congregation. I also knew that he was not going to be able to make many of the changes I hoped for. For these reasons I chose to leave quietly, a choice that many leavers adopt.

I did receive a call from my pastor. I had been anticipating it for weeks, and I was ready. I decided that, if he asked me where I had been or why I had left, I would be honest (loving first, but honest). To my surprise, he never did. He just asked me how I was doing and how my ministry was going. I answered, fully expecting him to ask more. It ended amiably and we have not talked again.

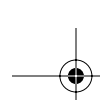
Closing the door. The amount of time spent in the threshold stage will vary depending on the leaver, the church and the circumstances. The leaving is complete once the door has been completely closed emotionally and the leaver no longer hopes for someone to come calling.

This is perhaps the most disconcerting stage. There is so much failure to work through: the failure of the church to satisfy someone who is genuinely longing after the heart of God, the failure to deepen relational bonds to the point where reconciliation (of ideas) is pursued at all costs. Finding a place to lay blame is an elusive enterprise, so for now we will simply identify the phenomenon. Again, it's possible for a leaver to remain in this stage for many years, even the rest of her life. Most, in time, will venture out again into the world of church (some only to cycle through the same disheartening process of disaffection and exit).

One problem we will discuss in detail later is that the structure of church itself isn't conducive to the embodiment of certain values. This doubt about church and the feeling of being burned is very real for the leaver in this stage. He isn't likely to rush back into a church environment unless he feels that the context carries with it enough promise for change.

I've known dozens of people who have lingered in this



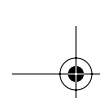


stage, often being misunderstood and criticized for forsaking fellowship and running away from God. Some will succumb to the guilt of leaving church and still overassociate their personal relationship with Jesus with their regular attendance at a Sunday-morning service. Yet this isn't the way most leavers see it. Many feel they have done what they needed to do. Their suspicion about organized church expression is often accompanied by a new tenacious desire to be connected to Christianity in general. Many leavers become faithful to Christian television or radio. They frequent Christian bookstores, perhaps compensating for lost church relationships. Some even go out of their way to stay connected to one or two Christians who are in the same stage, commiserating about the church and grievances to which they seem to be inextricably bound.

While many leavers will still remain faithful to evangelism and what they see as living their faith, they are obviously inhibited by an absence of accountability and connection to a corporate mission (something many of them did without as members of local congregations). For those of you currently in this stage, I want to ask you to take heart, read on and know that there is a place for you in the kingdom community. Your gifts, your passion for God, your way of seeing the world, even your flaws are needed. Jesus has not stopped loving you nor has he stopped calling you into community and alongside him in his mission. There is hope.

New beginning. I've dedicated the last section of this book to this final stage. It's a stage that some leavers never reach, but it's the most hopeful and is filled with the promise of the kingdom. I'm convinced that many leavers are leaving their churches for very good reasons. In fact, I wonder if a mass exodus from certain kinds of churches isn't precisely what is needed. Yet leaving, on its own, produces nothing. Perhaps the leaver is now less tortured, but in terms of the





kingdom and fruit for the gospel, what does leaving actually accomplish?

Many leavers leave because they believe in something more for the church, something closer to what Jesus taught. If we remain idle or jaded, we fail the hope that has been deposited in us. Leaving may be a necessary first step, but it's just that—the first step. The next is to find a vision that we can embrace and that reflects who we are and the sensibilities that God has given us. If we can't find that nearby, we ought to start it from scratch. Leavers need to re-form church expressions so that we make sense of them and are consistent with the biblical values God has imprinted on our hearts. The “new beginning” stage is about finding hope and learning to trust again. The turning point for the leaver moving into this stage is the hearing of new vision that outshines the fear and cynicism of the past.

In spite of (and perhaps because of) my missionary work outside the church, I became a leaver. I can vividly remember many of these stages. I remember reading Jamieson's book and identifying with so much of it—the growing frustration, the lack of voice, the mounting irrelevance, the perceived lack of substance, my turning point, the last straw—that all of these constructs are very personal to me. Having been through that experience, just reading his book and hearing my own frustrations echoed by so many was healing for me. I hope that this book also serves that purpose. At least I hope that you realize you're not alone.

Trying Something New

My journey back into the church had its seed in the church-planting initiative that I began in the wake of my leaving. Because I'm so committed to the kingdom and the notion of the church, I could not bring myself to leave until I had a viable alternative. I knew that younger believers were watching my life, so I did not want to walk out on the church and give them rea-





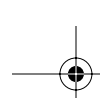
son to do the same. I felt constrained not simply to criticize the church but to be a part of its renewal. I wanted to work from within, but it became increasingly clear to me that I was either not wired to bring reform that way or that people were not wired to receive me. I wanted to be proactive, and I didn't want to be another voice of dissent without actually doing something productive in turn.

After leaving, I spent about two months in personal prayer. My situation was compounded by the fact that there were a number of people (about forty) who were waiting to plant a church with me; word had spread among those closest to me. After my time in prayer, I sensed that we should begin meeting as a group for more prayer. We started Fire by Night, a weekly, two-hour time of intercession (coupled with music) for the city. I felt sure that we needed to spend a season praying as a group for the church in our city and to step away from the role of critics or reformers. This time was very important for us in a number of ways.

While trying to find a place to meet for this unusual prayer meeting, we met a pastor who gave us use of a building that his church owned (an old, converted convenience store). It was perfect for us, and his heart for prayer and his immediate respect and trust started what would be a long-term relationship. This pastor gave us a key to his building, offered us everything he had, and even took notes as we talked with him, asking how the church could change to meet the challenges of the coming generation. I had written about the changes that I saw on the horizon for the church, and he gave those writings to his whole staff to read. We had never been so validated within the church before.

I was floored by this pastor's humility and love for us. Out of that prayer time, which lasted about six months in that form, we forged a partnership with his church. We called ourselves the Underground and eventually became an outreach of





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that church. I was offered an unpaid position on their staff (missionary in residence) that I accepted. I was also offered a place on the church's teaching team, which I also accepted.

Our approach to church was smaller, but we also saw the value of corporate worship. The Underground was allowed to pursue home-church planting, which was always our vision, while enjoying the traditional Sunday-morning experience. Further we were able to expand our vision for home churches out of this traditional church expression, going on to plant a dozen home churches through this partnership.

Starting Over

I wish I could say that this partnership lasted. We have continued our ministry, encouraging microchurch plants all over our city, but the relationship with the church changed as the leaders changed. Three years and two pastors later, we were right back where we'd started: cut out of a church's mission, disaffected, struggling to stay when we knew it was time to leave.

What is it about the church as we know it that leavers find so difficult? People are leaving, but why? While every situation is different, there are commonalities to our story and those of other leavers, a common critique that unites us.

